



The Screw Cap Closure

Everyone has their thoughts regarding the 'screwcap' bottle top. 'Should we purchase a bottle of wine that opens by turning the top? What will our friends, or maybe the new neighbors think? Should we buy the wine that has a lesser rating because it has a cork and not rated so well by RP and WS, or should I grab the bottle that is rated highly but has a screw cap? We all have that stigmatism. We all think that any wine that unscrews has to be in the same family as Boones Farm, MD 20-20, and other wines of this caliber - CHEAP, and we only drunk to get a good buzz. Remember those days?

We have customers today that can not get over the fact that some great wines now come with screw tops.

The hottest topic in the world of wine today isn't about vintages, varietals or even vineyards; it's the battle of natural cork vs. the screw cap (and alternate closures). Until recently, though a cork was no guarantee of a quality wine, a bottle closed by a screw-cap usually meant the wine was, well, of a lesser standard. But all of that has changed! In spite of the screw-cap's somewhat tarnished rep, numerous quality producers are making the change. Randall Gram of Bonny Doon has given up on cork completely. His entire production will be bottled under screw-cap this year because he thinks they are the best closure currently available.

The main reason winemakers are clamoring for alternate closures is all due to that nasty infection 2,4,6-Trichloranisole (or simply TCA). You may know it by the term, "corked" or "corky". This contamination happens during the cork manufacturing process, so little can be done to halt it other than scrupulous bark selection (and unfortunately, the cork industry is a bit slow to respond). But don't worry, TCA creates no health hazards, it's just darn unpleasant. It causes a foul odor and flavor reminiscent of sweaty gym socks or a damp, musty basement. Yikes!! But palates differ and TCA shows up in varying degrees. Even some of the most experienced wine judges will detect TCA at different concentrations.

But most troublesome for winemakers is the fact that the majority of wine consumers don't recognize the taste of this cork taint. They just think they don't like the wine. Research has discovered that 6 percent of all bottles of wine are infected 6%! That's a huge amount! We have a few people here and there that bring "stinky" wine back to us, but certainly not 6% of what we sell. And this may affect us, the retailers; because that customer may not trust us again for a recommendation; they may not even come back to the store! OK, maybe we're being a bit dramatic, but it does give one pause.

So, how about a scenario instead: Imagine you splurge on a really nice bottle of wine for the big boss coming to dinner. You talk up the wine, showing off your wine "connoisseur-ness", pop the cork, decant it and then pour, and then you begin to notice wrinkled noses and awkward smiles as the glasses are set back onto the table. Dinner is already on the table, getting cold, while you are scrambling to find another suitable bottle. If that bottle had been fitted with a Stelvin[®], or Zork[®], or Vino-LokT you might have received that raise.

So what are all of these different closures?

- Stelvin[®] - Boy, we should have bought stock in Stelvin[®] some time ago. Stelvin is made by a French company and is the largest manufacturer of screwcaps for the wine industry.
- Zork[®] - 'Zork, It's Aussie for Cork!' or so the tag line reads. It's a South Australian invention that consists of three parts: the closure has a tamper resistant cap, a foil or plastic oxygen barrier and a plunger, which pops on extraction and reseals after use.
- Vino-Lok - a closure first introduced in Europe and consists of a glass stopper with a plastic o-ring, which provides the airtight seal. An aluminum overcap holds the stopper in place and prevents tampering.
- Synthetic corks - many are finding that the wines fitted with this closure begin showing oxidation at early ages, so may soon be phased out altogether.

All of these closures can be opened by hand. Some top names are putting their top wines under these closures: Plumpjack, Sonoma-Cutrer, Argyle, and Calera. A huge portion of New Zealand and Australian wines are making the change, as well as some French producers.

So what are the pros and cons? Some believe that a cork allows the wine to breathe, and therefore ages wine more gracefully. Others will argue that good corks don't breathe and that it's the air between the cork bottom and the wine that provides all the oxygen needed for ageing. Still others will tell you that these air-tight closures have a "Peter Pan" effect, meaning no matter how old the wine, it will remain eternally youthful. To be honest, long-term scientific evidence is sketchy at best, so the debate rages on.

The majority of wine drunk in this country is consumed within eight hours of its purchase. And that majority is probably in the neighborhood of 95 percent. So how much of an issue is cellaring wine for most folks anyway? Who knows, wine lovers may someday soon look back at natural cork as an archaic and somewhat primitive bottle closure. Sure popping a cork with a flourish is fun, but for a wine lover, it's the taste that really matters. It's quite disappointing looking forward to a particular bottle, only to find it corked. Once that has happened to you a few times - or a few dozen times, screw-caps start to seem like a real good idea.

We suggest you grab the screw-cap bottle by the neck and give it a manly type twist, and get ready to savor some of the finest wines that will ever touch your palate.